

Commencement
1941

OUR MORAL HERITAGE

Fellow Students:

In this time of war, revolution, and widespread confusion, Commencement speakers will be tempted to discuss the harassing problems of immediate concern. Grave and disturbing as is the present situation, however, it is worth our while, as educated men and women, to look at its background. There are aspects of social existence fundamentally more important to man than the movements of armies and the current intrigues of politicians, international bankers, barons of business, warmongers, and other overambitious, ignorant, and selfish individuals and groups. Today few thinkers would identify the material advance of a modern civilization with progress in the absolute sense, for we are now aware that "a civilization may prosper externally and grow daily larger and louder and richer and more self-confident, while at the same time it is decreasing in social vitality and

losing its hold on the higher cultural traditions." I, therefore, propose to consider briefly with you today the nature of our moral heritage. Only through a study of values can we build a foundation on which we, as a free people, may stand in the present upheaval, or may construct adequate programs of national and world defense and rehabilitation.

Some two thousand years ago, in Egypt, the cradle of civilization, there dwelt a gentle folk who, in a world torn by war and contaminated by hate, refused to abandon the belief that man has a dignity and a destiny worthy of respect. During long periods of misrule under the dynasty of the Ptolemies and later under hard Greek and Roman taskmasters they endured persecution, injustice, and tyranny without loss of their convictions. In the midst of severe trials and tribulations, they were sustained while carrying on the routine duties of living by two conclusions in their system of thought: there is a life beyond the grave, and in this world human brotherhood should extend beyond the home to the community.

For upward of ten thousand years the ancestors of this people had been gradually formulating, upon the observations, reflections, and teachings of their scholars and sages, a set of values which represented "the emergence of a sense of moral responsibility as it was gradually assuming an increasing mandatory power over human conduct, a development which was moving towards the assertion of conscience as an influential social force." Thus, it was possible by the time of Christ for brave, thoughtful men to keep alight the torch of a rising civilization when wicked men were trying to extinguish it that they might, under cover of darkness, accomplish their evil purposes.

As it was then, so it is now. Not yet has the age of moral responsibility come to full fruition. Social gains must still be jealously guarded against the rapacity of the selfish, the blundering of the ignorant, the neutrality of the visionary, and the hopelessness of the timid. The struggle to apply the

sovereign rules of conduct in our lives is not only never-ending, but difficult and sometimes desperate. Today, as in many yesteryears, one is often tempted to exclaim with the ancient scribe: "Righteousness is cast out, iniquity is in the midst of the council hall. The plans of the gods are violated, their dispositions disregarded. The land is in distress, mourning is in every place, towns and districts are in lamentation. All men alike are under wrongs; as for respect, an end is made of it."

History teaches us how we may best resist social retrogression. In these trying times we shall do well to heed its lessons and to follow the example of those of our forebears whose constructive thinking has been directed toward the development of a civilization organized on the principles of what we have come to call "Christian democracy." We need to remind ourselves that the incentive to study and accumulate knowledge on man's nature and his place in the world cannot be destroyed; to observe that the results of this age-old inquiry

are a precious heritage which is increasing in value and forms a ladder by which human beings may climb from barbarism into the "age of character"; to preserve faith in our ability to develop a social order characterized by the repudiation of the law of the jungle and by the cultivation of all of the tolerance and freedom consistent with community living.

This course is fully justified. The rise of social idealism is not an historical accident nor an ineluctable mystery. It is the product of millenia of human experience, analyzed by intelligence and guarded by confidence in the reality of moral evolution. Although technological achievements have intensified and extended "man's inhumanity to man" to an extent never before known, it remains as clear as ever that the bodies of men can be destroyed but not their consciences, hopes, and aspirations. While the material records of human progress may be obliterated, "nothing that was worthy in the past departs; no truth or goodness realized by man ever dies, or can die; but

is all still here and, recognized or not, lives and works through endless changes."

The great leaders of confused humanity are not the so-called "successful men"--the captains and the kings whose names dot the pages of the newspapers and, unfortunately, of the history books--but the students, the thinkers, the idealists, the teachable, the lovers of humanity, those whom Christ called the "meek," those who will ultimately inherit the earth. The truly educated men and women of each generation are of this spiritual lineage. Such men and women may transform the social order of the modern world by effecting within themselves a renewal of moral and spiritual life, "by digging down to the moral and spiritual foundation of human existence and reviving the moral ideas that govern the life of the social body as such." They refuse to be "living fossils," anachronisms, or to live narrowly in the present and solely for themselves. They cherish rectitude as the most valuable of the soul's

possessions. They cling to faith in man's ability to lift himself from the mire of a sordid individualism. They decline to take

"From palace, priest, or code,
A meaner law than Brotherhood."

Members of the Class of 1941:

You are leaving a center of learning, an institution designed to improve the common lot of man. Here you should have not only improved your skills, but also refined and ordered your sense of human values. You are to enter a world in which you will be continually urged to join the forces of unrighteousness. You will be taken to the tops of hills and mountains and shown the kingdoms of the earth. You will on more than one occasion tend to become weary in well doing. To yield to the temptation to gain the world at the sacrifice of your soul will amount to repudiation of the teaching of your University. To become discouraged over the slowness and setbacks

of social progress will indicate failure to remember or realize fully that civilization is built not upon technological achievements but upon character, and "the foundations are therefore so new that we need feel no discouragement if the building has not yet exhibited the stability we may yet hope to see it achieve."

Since the principles of respectable communal living are our moral heritage, you who are leaving us to become alumni and we who are to remain to carry on the work of the University have the same obligations.

We must recognize our indebtedness for the knowledge and training we have received, and we must endeavor to work out our obligations to society by promoting a social order characterized in the individual by victory over self and an appreciation of the rights of others.

"He who lives only to benefit
himself confers on the world a benefit
when he dies."

Freedom, tolerance, equality of opportunity, kindness, and security for all men are ideals which we must help to

realize through self-discipline, self-reliance, self-respect, integrity, zeal for learning, justice, and due regard for constituted authority.

"There are two freedoms, the false where one is free to do what he likes, and the true where he is free to do what he ought."

Finally, we are expected to observe clearly, to analyze objectively, to reason logically, to express only honest judgments, and, above and including all, to retain confidence in the ultimate triumph of man over himself and his environment.

"When faith is lost, when honor dies,
The man is dead."

And now, for your University, I bid you Godspeed and good living.